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Marin firms honored for commute programs

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More than 80 Bay Area employers, including four from Marin, have been recognized as tops for commuters.

The County of Marin, the city of Novato, Autodesk in San Rafael, and San Quentin State Prison were honored for their commitment to alternatives that reduce traffic and air pollution and improve the quality of life for employees who commute.

The list was compiled by the Bay Area's Best Workplaces for Commuters Coalition, a group that includes the Environmental Protection Agency, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Bay Area Council, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Northern California Human Resources Association, RIDES for Bay Area Commuters, Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group, and Yahoo Inc.

It is estimated that Bay Area commuters spend more than 155,000 extra hours in traffic - amounting to 17 years - and more than \$1.8 million of wasted productivity each day, according to the EPA.

At San Quentin, prison officials were recognized for their van pool service. Started in the late 1990s after prison officials surveyed employees about their commutes, the program provides vans that pick up employees at designated locations in Modesto, Vacaville, and Sacramento and ferry them to the prison and back every day, Lt. Vernell Crittendon said. Of the prison's 1,548 full-time and 650 casual laborers, about 100 employees take advantage of the program, Crittendon said.

Prison officials also adjusted employees' start times to minimize the impact on the roads during rush hour, Crittendon said.

"The warden felt we had a responsibility to have a positive impact on our communities," he said. "This is one of the ways we feel we can assist to help ease the congestion on the freeways."

At Autodesk, a company long recognized for reducing the stress and impact on the roads commuting creates, the company promotes a "work-life balance philosophy," community relations manager Julie Wilder said.

In addition to telecommuting opportunities and flexible hours for those with a bad commute, the company boasts a zip code directory that is posted to an internal Internet site. As employees are hired, their home and office zip codes are listed on the site, enabling other employees to arrange carpools with people that live and work near them.

Commuters at Autodesk who elect to take public transportation can, through the payroll department, have money deducted for their efforts tax-free.

And, through Autodesk's "Guaranteed Ride Home" program, employees who either carpool or take public transit are eligible for a taxi ride home or to the hospital when a family emergency occurs.

Wilder said she knows firsthand that such programs are good for the company, their people, and the community.

"We said, 'Let's find out everything we can to get people out of their cars one person at a time,'" Wilder said. "I'm actually working in my sweats from home right now."

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